

Chapter One: Beautiful Chaos

If you've ever been chased with a cutlass over a popcorn machine, congratulations, you've officially survived boarding school.

That Saturday was supposed to be harmless. The fair had ended, our class had raised money, and the popcorn had been sold. But Madam Dorothy, our class teacher and housemistress stormed out of the staff room, shouting like a fire alarm, she waved an actual cutlass and demanded her popcorn machine back immediately.

You should've seen us, eight girls dragging that heavy thing across the compound like our lives depended on it. I was laughing so hard I could barely hold the handle. It was chaos. Beautiful, ridiculous chaos.

That was me, Nella Hayde. Not the class troublemaker, but definitely not a saint either. Somewhere between good girl and try me and see.

Phones were banned in our school, and everyone knew that. Still, mine stayed hidden in the sleeve of an old hoodie buried deep in my trunk. Not even my closest friends, Beverly and Alex, knew about it. Late at night, I'd sneak small moments to text home or check if the world outside still existed.

At home, I was the quiet, respectful daughter. In school, I was... well, different. I had a temper and a tongue sharp enough to cut through any nonsense. Teachers called me a role model. My mates knew better. I wasn't violent – I just didn't take disrespect.

And if you know anything about boarding school, you know drama is like air – everywhere. There were always whispers about who was secretly dating who, love letters under pillows, stolen snacks, and fights that started over spoons. Somehow, my name always managed to land in the middle of it.

First came the rumor that I was dating a senior named Alexander. I wasn't, but try convincing his girlfriend of that. She confronted me one Saturday during dining and caused a scene that could've qualified for a telenovela. Before the dust even settled, another rumor started – that I was “too close” to some juniors. Just because a few girls liked to hang around my bed after prep. Laughing. Talking. Sharing stories. Apparently, friendship now needed a permit.

Still, I had my constants – Beverly and Alex.

Beverly was my gist partner and chaos twin; Alex was the calm one who balanced us out with quiet logic and the occasional smart remark. The three of us were called The Table of Gist. Fitting name.

There were also the juniors – Adina and Andrea. Adina liked to sit on my bed after prep, and Andrea brought me snacks from time to time, even though I never asked. Maybe they just felt

safe around me. Or maybe they wanted the “senior experience.” Who knows?

Despite all the noise, I was focused. And when midterm break came, I was ready for home for peace, real food, and the people who never got tired of me.

The moment I stepped inside the house, the smell of spices hit me like a warm hug. Mum was in the kitchen, cooking my favorite meal. I dropped my bag and wrapped my arms around her. That smell, that familiar blend of pepper, onions, and something only mothers can mix right reminded me exactly why home would always be my favorite place.

Then came Jenny.

My sister. My person. My mirror.

She was eight years older, beautiful, stubborn, and the only person who knew both versions of me, the polite girl from home and the fiery one from school. Her birthday had just passed, so I came bearing gifts: one for her birthday, one for Valentine’s Day, and something small for Mum. Watching them smile made me feel like I’d done something right for once.

The next few days were simply helping Mum cook, teasing Jenny about her playlist and sleeping like I hadn’t seen a bed in months. It was peaceful. Ordinary.

But peace has a way of ending quietly.

I went back to school after midterm, ready to finish strong. The last term blurred by in a rush of exams, farewells, and half-kept promises. Then I came home for good, not knowing life was about to test me in a different way.

Two months after I completed school, everything changed.

One evening, Jenny was laughing at a movie. The next, she was on the floor – gasping, shaking. We rushed her to the hospital. I remember holding Mum’s hand, praying, begging, promising everything I could think of. But it didn’t matter. Her heart stopped.

And just like that... she was gone.

Days turned into a blur. Mum tried to stay strong, she’d smile, tell me Jenny was proud of me, that she believed I’d grow into a woman who stood her ground. But I could see the cracks in her smile. I could feel the cracks in me.

People thought I was being dramatic when I became quieter, colder. They didn’t understand that grief isn’t loud, it’s heavy. It sits in your chest like unspoken words you can’t swallow.

Sometimes, I replayed our last morning together. I’d broken her phone screen by accident, trying to help her with breakfast. I expected her to shout, but she just smiled, tugged my cheeks, and said:

"I know you think I'm mad at you, but I'm not. Always be yourself, even when the world misunderstands you. Just... don't go around breaking phones, those don't come cheap?"

Then she laughed; that soft, golden sound and tapped my forehead.

That was the last laugh.

The last connection.

The last piece of light before everything dimmed.

That's how it began, the story of the girl who smiled through storms.

That's how I became Nella Hayde.

Chapter Two: New Soil, Same Roots

Months passed after the funeral, but the silence at home didn't. Jenny was gone — and with her, a piece of me that no one could fill.

The house stayed full for days, flooded with relatives and neighbors who came to mourn. Some I hadn't seen in years, others I knew I wouldn't see again unless someone else died. That's just how family gatherings worked sometimes.

Even when everyone left, the air still felt heavy. Same house. Same smell. Same bed. But nothing felt the same. I'd wake up and catch myself turning to Jenny's side, asking questions she couldn't answer anymore — about clothes, my hair, or whether my eye bags made me look tired or just dramatic. But the silence always answered first.

And then life, in its cruel timing, decided to move on — with or without me.

My university admission letter came like a reminder that the world wasn't stopping for my grief. I'd gotten into Chanceland University, a place so big and serene it almost looked photoshopped.

My first day? A disaster.

Orientation for freshers had already started, and I arrived late, dragging my suitcase through the blazing sun like campus was testing my survival skills already. I slipped into the hall quietly, trying to blend into the crowd — the goal was to exist invisibly for the first week.

But of course, campus had other plans.

We were divided into tour groups, and that's when I realized university life was its own reality show.

There were freshers already acting like seniors, walking around with their "squads." There were loners like me pretending to be invisible. And then there were the ones who had already found love – on day one. I still don't know how they managed that. Maybe there was a secret "Matchmaking Booth" at the gate.

Then came the shocker: a car full of boys blasting music like it was a street concert, spinning in circles near the auditorium. I froze, blinking like a WiFi signal, wondering if they owned an oil company or just didn't care how much petrol cost. Either way, it screamed chaos.

Campus life was loud, fast, and unapologetically unpredictable. I felt lost – like a goat at a beach party. Everything was new, everyone was new, and the one person I really wanted to see... wasn't here.

I kept looking for Jenny – in the crowd, in reflections, in little habits. I caught myself imagining her voice, teasing me like always: "Nel, look your best!" But all that looked back at me was reality – I was on my own.

I looked around the crowd, hoping to find someone who seemed as lost as I felt. My eyes landed on a girl standing alone, scrolling through her phone. She looked quiet and approachable even.

I took a deep breath and walked over. "Hi," I said with a friendly smile.

She barely looked at me before saying flatly, "I'm not interested."

Okay. Message received. I walked away like nothing happened, ego slightly bruised but pride intact. "No new friends," I muttered to myself. "I can do this alone."

That confidence lasted exactly ten minutes.

When registration started, the confusion nearly broke me. Finance Office, Faculty Block, Student Secretariat – it was like a maze built to test sanity. That's when I met Emma.

She had a kind face, a bright smile, and the same lost expression I did. We instantly clicked – two confused souls navigating paperwork and bad directions together. She was my miracle for the day.

Unfortunately, we didn't end up in the same hall. Sad.

But fate wasn't done with me yet.

Because when I finally found my room and opened the door... guess who was inside unpacking?

Yep – Miss "I'm not interested."

She looked at me like she'd seen a ghost. I looked at her like she was a Wi-Fi password I didn't remember.

I walked in, picked a bed, and started unpacking. She turned sharply.

"I already chose that bed," she snapped.

I smiled sweetly. "Girl... I'm not interested."

Petty? Maybe. Satisfying? Absolutely.

I switched beds, trying to stay calm. Then she muttered under her breath, "Just as I thought."

Oh, my hand itched to give her a classic African-reset slap — the kind that rearranges your ancestors — but I held myself back. It was my first day on campus; I wasn't about to make the news.

We stayed quiet after that. I didn't know her name yet, but I knew one thing — I wasn't going to be bullied. Not on this soil.

So here I was: new place, new faces, and a roommate I already wanted to evict.

By the end of the week, the orientation was over, timetables were out, and the real work was about to begin.

Classes started the next week, and I was buzzing with excitement — Bachelor of Laws (LLB). It sounded powerful, adult, like a new identity I could grow into.

On my way to collect my timetable, I spotted a guy walking toward me — tall, clean-cut, with the kind of smile that could disarm security.

He waved.

"Hi, I'm Aaron," he said. "I just got here. I missed orientation, and I'm completely lost. Could you help me find the Management Department?"

Normally, I'd mind my business. But something about his calm energy made me pause.

"Sure," I said. "I'm Nella. I'm also a fresher, but I can walk you there."

He hesitated. "I don't want to trouble you."

"You're not," I smiled. "Besides, getting lost alone is overrated."

We walked, talked, and laughed more easily than I expected. It wasn't awkward — it was... refreshing. By the time we reached his department, we'd already exchanged contacts.

Back at my own department, I met Lola and Jane — two girls who, in less than a day, felt like

I'd known them forever. Lola even turned out to be in the same hall as me, and by the time we walked back together, we were already gossiping like roommates.

Classes began on Tuesday, which meant Monday was mine — a free day to relax. My actual roommate, the “I’m not interested” girl (whom I later learned was named Angel), had already left for class. Out of boredom, I joined Lola and Jane, and we spent the day trading stories.

By Tuesday, we were ready. New week, new confidence, new chaos.

The first lectures were a mix of excitement and panic — some professors were funny and engaging, others looked like they’d been sent to test our faith.

By Friday, I was finally starting to breathe again. But campus had other plans.

That evening, I walked into the room and found Angel with a guest. A guy. Her boyfriend.

They were all smiles until he turned to me and said casually, “Hey, you must be her roommate. I’m Clifford.”

I froze. Clifford? Really? The irony was too loud.

He asked what had happened between us, and I told him everything — the first day, the bed drama, the awkward silence.

He looked at her and said, “Babe, just apologize.”

She rolled her eyes but muttered, “Okay fine. I’m sorry for how I acted.”

It wasn’t heartfelt, but it was enough.

“It’s cool,” I said simply.

From then, we started speaking — not much, just three safe phrases: “Good morning.” “Off to class?” “Take care.” Baby steps.

That night, I couldn’t sleep.

So I wrote to Jenny.

“Dear Jenny,

Yesterday, I somehow made four new friends. Aaron (the smooth talker), Emma (my miracle during registration), and two girls from my department, Lola and Jane. Not bad for a campus rookie, right? I also argued with my roommate and almost slapped her — long story. You would’ve been in stitches. Still, when the laughter fades, I miss you. It feels strange to move on without you, but I’m trying.”

The next afternoon, after lectures, Jane showed up giggling about a “friend” she swore was

just a friend. Lola and I didn't buy it. We teased her endlessly as we walked out for lunch.

That's when I spotted someone familiar in the crowd.

"Alex!" I yelled.

He turned, eyes wide. "Nella?! What are you doing here?"

Alex – my old secondary school bestie. The one who disappeared after graduation. We hugged, laughed, and caught up fast. He explained he'd lost his phone and every contact. I forgave him immediately.

I introduced him to Lola, and we swapped numbers again – a small reunion that felt like fate was quietly realigning something.

University life was already a mix of madness, friendship, and surprise reunions.

And deep down, I knew this was only the beginning.

Chapter Three: Silent Echoes

They say time heals, but no one warns you that healing feels like being dragged barefoot across gravel—blindfolded, with a backpack full of unspoken pain.

Second week of lectures, and I was already tired.

Tired of smiling when I didn't feel like it.

Tired of pretending everything was fine.

Tired of watching people who seemed to have this whole university thing figured out while I still felt like a guest in my own life.

Grief sneaks in quietly. One minute you're laughing with friends, trying to memorise sections of a Constitution you barely understand, and the next—boom—Jenny's laugh echoes in your mind like it never left. I can almost hear her teasing, asking why I'm still single "with a face like this."

Truth is, I still haven't figured out how to live in a world that doesn't have her in it.

People see Nella Hayde—the smart girl, the sarcastic girl, the she's-got-potential girl.

What they don't see is the part of me that stays up at night hugging my pillow like it can replace Jenny's warmth.

The part that still saves funny stories in my head, hoping to tell her later.

The part that feels guilty for moving forward.

But life doesn't ask permission to keep going.

Lectures were piling up fast. Mr Fords had already dropped a 20-page reading list with a cheerful, "No pressure, it's just your future." Thanks, sir. Truly inspiring.

I'd started noticing patterns: Jane was the always-prepared one, Lola the I'll-read-the-night-before type, and me? Somewhere between I'll try my best and Lord, take the wheel.

Angel and I still weren't friends, but we weren't enemies either. We existed like two people in a long-distance marriage-polite, civil, emotionally unavailable. She did her thing; I did mine.

Sometimes her boyfriend came over. They'd watch movies on her laptop with earphones in, but somehow I still heard every giggle, every whispered baby, every kiss that echoed louder in my chest than in the room.

Not because I wanted what they had. No. It just reminded me that for some people, life moves on faster than for others.

Emma had settled in perfectly. Lola and Jane had become my chaos partners. And Aaron... Aaron was quietly becoming a constant.

We didn't share classes, but we kept running into each other-cafeteria, notice board, random walkways. He'd send me memes or text simple check-ins like, "How's your head?" that somehow felt deeper than "How are you?"

I had friends now, yes-but not the kind Jenny was. She was the kind of friend who understood my moods without needing a manual. The kind who'd just look at me and ask, "What's wrong?" and mean it.

Still, I tried. I hung out with Lola and Jane, we studied together, made fun of impossible readings, shared snacks, shared stress. They were wonderful. But the hole Jenny left was Jenny-shaped, and nothing else fit.

One rainy evening, I found myself sitting on the hallway floor outside our room. My head was heavy, eyes puffy, and I wasn't even sure why. Jenny's favourite song had slipped into my playlist while I was revising, and suddenly I couldn't breathe.

I didn't realise I was crying until Angel walked past and asked, awkwardly, "Are you okay?"

I nodded.

Lied.

Wiped my face and forced a smile.

That's what you do when your pain makes people uncomfortable—you shrink it down and hide it under “I'm fine.”

Later that night, I stepped outside to sit on the bench near our hall block. The stars were out—calm, careless, glowing above someone barely holding it together.

Aaron texted first, then appeared minutes later, like he always did, perfectly on time without even knowing it.

“Hey,” he said softly, sitting beside me. “You okay?”

I gave him the classic I'm fine smile—the one that actually means I'm not fine, but I don't have the strength to unpack it.

He didn't push. Just sat there in silence with me.

After a long pause, he said, “You remind me of my sister. She passed away two years ago.”

My chest tightened. “Mine passed away too,” I whispered. “A few months ago.”

We sat there quietly, two strangers bound by the same kind of ache.

For the first time since coming to Chanceland, someone truly got it.

Jenny wasn't just my sister. She was my safe place—loud, annoying, chaotic, but safe. Losing her felt like someone yanked the ground from under my feet, and I'd been stumbling through life ever since, trying to find balance in a world that suddenly stopped making sense.

But I knew what she'd tell me if she were here.

So I whispered it to the stars anyway.

I'll try again tomorrow.

Chapter Four: Triangle

Weeks turned into months and life kept moving. I called home often to check on my parents;

we were all still learning how to live without Jenny. Thankfully things were calm, and that alone was enough peace for me.

By mid-semester we had covered several modules and were preparing for our first quiz. Lola, Jane, Andrew, Herald, and I had formed a study group. Aaron and I had grown closer too. And no, we weren't hiding anything. I thought he was good-looking and kind, but I wasn't falling. At least, that was the story I kept telling myself.

Alex and I still kept in touch. Distance made it hard to meet, but somehow we stayed connected.

Then came one quiet Saturday. I had just finished cleaning when Angel suddenly started a full conversation. She asked if I had plans. I said no. She looked serious and said, "We've been roommates for months, and the vibe is off. Maybe we should go out, talk, and fix that."

I just stared. Was this a prank?

"So, what do you say?" she pressed.

I nodded, still processing the fact that Angel, the same girl who once called me dramatic, was now offering friendship.

She picked out my entire outfit too, acting like my clothes would ruin her public image. I decided to go with it. Maybe we could actually get along.

When she finished styling me, I barely recognised myself. It was bold, edgy—nothing like my usual. I didn't know whether to be impressed or suspicious.

We went to a rooftop lounge called The Nest, a Chanceland favourite—fairy lights, good music, full Instagram energy.

Halfway through our drinks, Angel's boyfriend appeared with another guy who introduced himself as Nathan. That was when it clicked: this wasn't a bonding outing. It was a set-up. Angel was playing matchmaker.

I was annoyed but stayed calm. Nathan sat so close our shoulders touched, grinning like a full-time flirt. Meanwhile Angel and her man were already in movie-romance mode.

I started praying for an escape. That's when I spotted Alex three tables away. Instantly, a plan formed. I excused myself to "use the washroom," called Alex, and told him everything. He laughed, teased me, but agreed to help.

He was to walk up, pretend to be my boyfriend, and rescue me from the setup.

It was working perfectly—until Aaron walked in.

Just as Alex reached the table and said, "Hey babe, ready to go?" Aaron appeared behind him.

Then Alex sealed the act with a quick kiss on my cheek. Not part of the plan.

I froze. Not because of Alex, but because of Aaron's face. Confusion? Hurt? Disappointment? I couldn't tell. Alex, still acting, took my hand and led me away. Angel and her crew sat speechless. I looked back once, catching Aaron's unreadable eyes before turning away.

Alex was still laughing about how the plan worked. I barely heard him. My mind was tangled in every emotion possible.

He noticed. "Hey... what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. "Just walk me back to my hall."

We walked in silence. When we arrived, I waved and went inside.

The following week, Angel and I quietly slipped back into our cold-war routine. The roommate peace treaty had expired. Alex kept calling and texting, but I ignored every message, not because I wanted to, but because I didn't know what to say. My thoughts were chaos.

And Aaron? Silence. No texts, no memes, nothing. I'd been ghosted by a boy who was very much alive.

I finally told Lola and Jane everything. They listened like gossip judges and reached two conclusions:

"One, Alex likes you."

"Two, you like Aaron."

Me? Like Aaron? Never. I denied it faster than someone caught eating the last piece of meat in a stew. Yet deep down, something inside me wasn't so sure.

The next day in Legal Systems and Methods, the lecturer blessed us with a group project—the you pass together or fail together kind. Luckily my study group was ready: Lola, Jane, Andrew, Herald, and me.

After class, I spotted Aaron at the far end of the hall. He wasn't alone. A confident new girl stood beside him, too comfortable to be new. I walked over, trying to sound casual.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he answered, his voice heavy. The air between us could be sliced with a debit card. Then the girl smiled and said, "Wait... are you two exes or something?"

Excuse me, what?

Aaron and I stared at each other, mouths open. Then he said, "Nah, we're just friends—and she has a boyfriend."

Come again, sir?

But the way he said it told me everything. He was hurt. He'd believed I was taken. For some strange reason, that realization made my heart do a backflip. I burst out laughing, then quickly turned it into an exaggerated cough. Tragic recovery.

Aaron didn't even smile. He just said "bye" in a tone so dry it could absorb oil, then left with her. That's when it hit me. I was jealous.

And I hated that I was.

So I decided to face Alex and fix things.

When we met, he looked upset—jaw tight, brows furrowed. I didn't blame him. I'd ghosted him after using him for my fake-boyfriend plan.

"I'm sorry," I said before he even sat. "I should've called or texted. I wasn't trying to use you, I just..." Words failed me.

He sighed. "I didn't mind helping. It was fun messing with Angel, but then you disappeared. You asked for help and left me hanging like I was a prop."

That stung.

"I know," I said quietly. "You didn't deserve that."

He hesitated, then asked, "So, was it the kiss? Or that guy behind us? Is there something going on between you two?"

I looked up, no witty comeback, no denial—just silence that said maybe.

He waited. I changed the subject. Classic me. Somehow, we drifted into another conversation, pretending that emotional earthquake hadn't happened.

Eventually we parted, and I headed for my study group, praying for a drama-free evening.

On my way, I saw Angel's boyfriend in a lecture hall. But this time, he wasn't alone. A girl sat beside him, far too comfortable.

I could've walked away. Should've. But I didn't. Even if Angel was a handful, she didn't deserve that.

So I marched in and confronted him. The girl looked horrified. The moment I mentioned he had a girlfriend, she packed up and vanished.

That left me and the cheater. After a round of denial, he had the nerve to ask if I liked him. Because apparently exposing him meant I was into him.

Unbelievable.

I left him standing there, drowning in his own shamelessness, and rushed to my group—only a few minutes late, thank you very much.

By the time we finished, our presentation plan looked solid. For once, something was going right.

But drama wasn't done with me.

When I got back to the hall, ready to spill the news to Angel, guess who was there? Her boyfriend. Sitting comfortably beside her like a loyal pet.

I stood at the door, blinked twice, then laughed. Loudly. Without wasting time, I told her everything I'd seen.

But apparently, in his version of events, I was the villain. According to him, I'd been all over him, begging him to dump Angel for me.

And she believed him.

She came at me like a lioness on a revenge mission. That was when I realised these two were perfect for each other—Barbie the Barbarian and Mufasa the Billy Goat. Soulmates in delusion.

So I bowed out gracefully.

Whatever volcano they were building, it wasn't going to erupt on my conscience.

Chapter Five: Bonds and Confessions

Once upon a time, Angel and I lived like two strangers in a long-distance marriage—cordial, civil, and emotionally unavailable. Now we'd evolved into something more explosive. Think two grumpy cats forced to share a litter box. From morning hissing to afternoon scoffing, we had mastered the art of sitting on each other's happiness until one of us broke.

It got so bad it felt like we were starring in our own psychological thriller, *Roommates Gone Rogue*. I started questioning my sanity. Should I move out for peace? Probably. But also, why should I? She had been mean to me for two weeks straight over a cheating boyfriend. Girl, be serious. She'd better fix her attitude before I became the villain in her season finale.

Since minding my business is my secret superpower, I focused on something better—my all-day outing with Alex. Apparently, I'd been spending less time with him than in high school, and according to him, that was unacceptable. I agreed. Every law student deserves a day off from constitutional headaches and caffeine dependency.

That Friday night, I did something wild: took a walk. Alone. I'd wanted to for weeks but always chickened out. This time I dressed up and stepped out like the main character of a coming-of-age film. Campus at night was soothing—the breeze, the dim lights, the quiet chaos.

Honestly, I wished Lola and Jane were there. The gossip would've been premium. From marathon phone callers to overachievers studying like their scholarships depended on it, to the PDA champions acting like their relationships came with lifetime warranties. Let's not forget the frat boys catcalling every girl like they were auditioning for "Campus Clowns Anonymous." For the first time, I saw what campus really looked like at night—and I loved it.

Eventually, I wandered into a little green space with a decorated bench called the "Lovers' Bench." It was cute. A bit cliché, but cute. I sat quietly until a guy came and sat beside me. He greeted me gently, and I smiled back, silently praying he wouldn't be weird. We sat in companionable silence until a group of overgrown toddlers started playing dodgeball nearby. Who plays dodgeball in the dark?

Before I could blink, one of them launched the ball straight at my face. The disrespect. Did they apologize? Of course not. They laughed like idiots. I was about to give them a piece of my mind when the guy beside me stood up first, deflated their ball, and called them out. A hero in a plain T-shirt. The boys walked off, clearly allergic to accountability.

I turned to my defender of dignity, and we got talking. His name was Peter, a level 400 business student. Witty, friendly, and just the right amount of bold. After some campus banter, he offered to walk me back to my hall. And just like that, a stranger became an acquaintance by chance.

The next morning, I woke up suspiciously optimistic. It was Saturday—outing day with Alex. Naturally, I needed the perfect outfit, so I called Jane and Lola for "light" advice. Big mistake. They went full glam squad, teasing me endlessly.

"Girl, that's a date. Stop lying to yourself," Lola said.

"Nope, not a date," I insisted. "Just two friends escaping academic prison."

They didn't buy it. Jane smirked. "Sure, and you're wearing makeup for the sun, right?"

I gave up and let them play stylist. When I finally looked in the mirror—hair slayed, outfit sharp, confidence high—I couldn't even lie. I looked good.

One and a half hours later, I met Alex, who had been waiting like a patient prince. He stared

for a few seconds before smiling. "You look incredible." I pretended not to blush. We hadn't planned much beyond "hang out," so it turned into a freestyle day. We walked around campus, laughed about high school days, and just existed comfortably.

Eventually, we stopped by The Nest for food and conversation. Everything was calm until Alex dropped a casual bomb.

"So... want to check out Island Hotel?"

I raised a brow. "That couple-ish place?"

He laughed. "It's not just for couples. My friends go there all the time."

In my head, I sighed. This boy wanted a fake date at a real couple zone. But after his guilt-tripping and those puppy eyes, I caved.

Island Hotel was stunning. The kind of place that made you forget you were a broke student. The air even smelled expensive. I was panicking about the prices until Alex laughed and said, "Relax. Let me be a gentleman."

He led me to an elevator, grinning. "Close your eyes, you'll love this."

When the elevator opened, my jaw dropped. The rooftop terrace was breathtaking. You could see the entire campus skyline glowing beneath the stars. I stood frozen, awestruck.

"Beautiful, right?" he asked.

I nodded, barely breathing. As we settled down with drinks, the air shifted. Then Alex decided to ruin the peace.

"So... about Aaron."

Sir. Wrong rooftop, wrong moment. But I knew I couldn't dodge forever. So I told him everything—how Aaron and I met, how our friendship grew, and that night he played my fake boyfriend.

Alex just stared, then said quietly, "So basically... you have feelings for him."

My brain glitched. To save face, I fired back, "Well, my friends think you have feelings for me."

He smirked. "Guess your friends are smarter than you."

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

He leaned forward. "Yes, Nella. I obviously have feelings for you."

I nearly choked on my drink. He panicked and called for water. I played it up, milking the

drama like a pro. When he offered to take me to the hospital, I finally said, “I’m not dying. Just emotionally disoriented.”

He laughed, and I made him promise to take me home before dropping any more confessions. When we got to my hall, he held me close for a moment. “You won’t ignore my texts, right?”

“Sir, please,” I muttered, pulling his cheek.

Monday came like a thief. I woke to sniffles. At first, I thought I was dreaming—until I saw Angel crying. Instantly, I forgot our drama. Pain was pain. Without thinking, I hugged her, and she melted into me, sobbing harder.

Lola and Jane came knocking with their usual “spill-the-tea” energy, but one look at the room and they slipped out quietly. I stayed with Angel. No words. Just tissues and presence.

Eventually, she whispered, “Thank you.”

Turns out, Clifford the cheating boyfriend had been caught red-handed. I wasn’t surprised. Even his name sounded like bad decisions. Angel, in all her innocence, had fallen for the first guy who called her pretty, and now she was paying for it.

I made her pepper soup, heavy on the pepper, light on mercy. She finally fell asleep, and for once, the room felt peaceful.

Later that day, I met Lola and Jane at my new favorite spot—the open garden. Once I told them everything about Alex, the rooftop, the confession, the choking, their reactions were dramatic.

“You choked?”

“Yes. I nearly died.”

“Girl, that’s iconic.”

But they weren’t done. Jane leaned forward. “Let’s talk about the real tea. Why do you keep dodging the Aaron question?”

“I don’t,” I lied.

They exchanged looks that screamed, “Girl, we were born at night, not last night. Then they turned it into a courtroom debate—Lola defending Aaron, Jane defending Alex—while I sat there like a confused judge who didn’t even sign up for the case.

Later that evening, I went back to check on Angel. To my surprise, she was fine—movie on, popcorn in hand, back to queen mode. We finally talked, laughed, gossiped, and for the first time in weeks, the room felt like home again.

The next day in class, peace ended. Our Legal Systems professor dropped a bombshell in the group chat the night before: a real-life courtroom-style presentation, with spectators, other departments, and lecturers as judges. Happening next Saturday. "Prepare well or fail drastically," he wrote before leaving the group. Just left, like a villain in a movie.

Naturally, chaos followed. Memes, panic, and half-serious resignation letters filled the chat. When he walked into class, he said, "If you have concerns, save them for after your results." Translation: suffer in silence.

After class, we drowned our pain in fried rice and chicken at The Nest. And then, as if fate was laughing at me, I saw Nathan—the same guy Angel had tried to set me up with—sitting across from Jane. Yes, Jane. The timing? Insane. The universe clearly had a sense of humor.

Later that night, as I lay in bed, my brain replayed everything: Alex's confession, Angel's heartbreak, Nathan's reappearance, and the upcoming courtroom presentation from hell.

My brain was fried. My heart, confused. My GPA, threatened. But for once, I was calm. Maybe I was growing, or maybe I was just too tired to care.

Then my phone buzzed. A text from Alex:

"Hope you slept well. Just checking in. No pressure."

I read it twice and couldn't help but smile. It was... sweet.

Then another, from Aaron:

We haven't talked in a while. Just wanted to see how you're doing. Maybe hang out sometime?

Back-to-back texts from both of them. My life officially felt like a romantic ambush.

I shoved it all into a mental drawer labeled "Later" and focused on what mattered: surviving the Legal Systems presentation without turning it into a comedy show.

Because one thing was clear—life at Chanceland never gives peace for free.

Chapter Six: Legal Systems and Emotional Damages

Let's rewind.

Before courtroom chaos, before Angel called Clifford “an emotional virus in jeans,” before Jane and Lola started treating my heart like a love triangle draft paper—there was Aaron’s text.

“We haven’t talked in a while. Just wanted to see how you’re doing. Maybe hang out sometime?”

I stared at it for twenty whole minutes like it was a pop quiz that would decide the fate of my GPA. And then I replied.

“Okay. When and where?”

The audacity of healing.

He chose the place. Somewhere neutral. Public, quiet, low-stakes—a smoothie stand on the edge of campus that always smelled like coconut and confusing decisions.

When I arrived, he was already seated. Tall, neat, hands crossed over his lap like someone about to explain himself.

“Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” I echoed, standing a little longer than necessary before sitting.

Silence.

Then more silence.

I sipped my smoothie like it held answers. He did the same.

He eventually broke the ice. “You look well.”

“Thanks. You... look like a decent human again.”

That earned a small laugh. Then came another pause, the kind that feels heavier than it should.

We used to joke like fools, talk like best friends. Now it felt like we were walking on glass barefoot.

“You just... changed,” I said finally, meeting his eyes. “After that night with Alex... when he pretended to be my boyfriend to get me out of that awkward situation, you just shut down.”

Aaron froze slightly. His brows furrowed. “Wait... that was a pretence?”

I blinked. “Yeah. It was never real.”

“I thought...” He trailed off, his voice low. “You two looked close. Comfortable.”

“We weren’t. He was just helping me get rid of a guy who wouldn’t take no for an answer. It

wasn't real."

Aaron leaned back, silent. Processing. His confusion softened into something more vulnerable.

"I guess it was all on me then," he said quietly. "I wish I hadn't assumed."

"I wish you hadn't disappeared," I replied, not accusing, just honest.

He exhaled slowly, shoulders tense. "I got mad. Not because it was him... but because I thought I didn't matter anymore. Like, I had just started believing maybe... I did."

I blinked at him. You did.

But I didn't say it.

He continued, "And then I backed off. I didn't want to meddle or be in the middle of something that wasn't mine."

"So you stopped texting altogether," I said.

"Yeah," he admitted. "And I regretted it later. But by then, I thought I'd lost the right to be in your space."

That sentence sat between us like an open wound we didn't know how to close.

"I didn't know how to talk to you after that," he whispered.

"And I didn't know how to fix it," I said softly.

We didn't say much else. No dramatic hug. No big confession. Just silence—real, unforced silence. Like two people standing at the edge of something fragile, afraid to touch it but too drawn to walk away.

Eventually, we stood to leave. He offered to walk me part of the way, and I said yes. Not because I was ready to leave, but because maybe... I didn't want to walk away either.

Monday hit like a badly written plot twist. You know, the kind where everything goes wrong and there's no commercial break?

Tuesday morning started with me nearly drowning my cereal in boiling water instead of milk. That should've been my warning. I was tired. Emotionally drained. Mentally fried. Physically? I looked like I'd been hit by the Chanceland shuttle bus, reversed on, and respectfully carried to class.

Also, can we talk about how my love life had officially become a group project?

Lola and Jane had taken it upon themselves to "assess the romantic battlefield" and were currently treating my heart like it was up for auction.

"Alex is clearly the main character," Jane said over breakfast, sipping her tea like a film director analyzing her cast.

Lola raised a brow. "Girl, have you seen Aaron? That man breathes beautiful air."

Me: "Can I eat my egg in peace?"

Them: "Absolutely not."

By the time I got ready for class, my bra strap broke mid-dressing, my eyebrow pencil rebelled, and my eyeliner tried to impersonate Picasso. But I slapped on some gloss, grabbed my bag, and sprinted to class like my GPA depended on it—because it kind of did.

Our Legal Systems and Methods professor, who I'm convinced writes telenovelas in his spare time, decided to spice things up with a courtroom-style presentation.

Real spectators. Real guest lecturers. Real humiliation, potentially.

And as if that wasn't enough, he dropped a message in the class group chat:

"Some participants will present in pairs. You will be informed of your pairings the morning of the presentation. Choose wisely who takes the lead."

Excuse me, choose wisely? Sir, this isn't Hunger Games.

Naturally, the group chat exploded. Memes. Empty threats. Herald announcing, "If I faint mid-presentation, pretend it's part of the act." Same, Herald. Same.

Later that day, our group met at the study hall for prep. Books stacked like legal files. Water bottles labeled "Exhibit A." Angel perched nearby with popcorn like she'd bought front-row tickets to our stress.

Andrew looked up from his notes. "So... who's handling cross-examination?"

All heads turned to me.

"What? Why me?"

Lola shrugged. "Because you argue like your life depends on it. Use your powers for good."

And just like that, I was voted "Most Likely to Cross-Examine Someone Into Tears."

We worked late, fuelled by loaded fries and sarcasm. Jane kept shouting "Objection!" every time Herald made a weak point, and honestly, our chaos was starting to sound like a functioning team.

Until he walked in.

Nathan.

White shirt. Smug smile. Walking embodiment of unfinished business.

Jane perked up instantly. "Hey, you made it!"

Oh right. Her "friend." The same Nathan who once starred in my unwanted blind date setup courtesy of Angel. A memory I'd filed under "Rejected Quests and Other Tragedies."

But then I noticed Angel.

She was seated quietly at the back, legs crossed, popcorn midair—until Nathan walked in. Then her face changed. Back straight. Eyes sharp. Air colder than the freezer section at LaraMart.

She didn't say a word, just stared at him like betrayal had walked in wearing cologne.

He greeted everyone, took a seat near Jane, and smiled at me. "Nice handwriting."

"Thanks," I said flatly. "It's not for decoration."

Lola choked on her drink. Herald whispered, "Tension."

I ignored them. I just didn't have the energy for fake friendliness.

When the session finally ended, Jane muttered, "Would it have killed you to be nice?"

"Wouldn't have killed him to be invisible," I muttered back.

Angel just smirked from her corner like she was watching the pilot episode of *Drama: The Reboot*.

That night, I stared at my phone.

Alex: "Hope your prep went well. Want to revise together this week?"

Aaron: "Heard about the courtroom thing. You'll kill it."

Why do they always text at bedtime like emotional hitmen? I turned my phone off and buried it under my pillow. Not tonight, heart.

The week flew by in a blur of mock rehearsals, caffeine, and confusion. Herald started calling Jane "Your Honour" even outside study hall. Lola threatened to object to life in general. By Friday, we were all on the edge of an academic breakdown.

Then Saturday came.

The main auditorium had been transformed into something straight out of Pinterest's "Law School Dreams." Judges' tables. Jury benches. Student audience. Cameras.

Our professor stood in the center like a game show host.

"You'll present in groups," he said. "Midway, each group will split into two for cross-examination rounds against a random team. Surprise is the spice of learning."

I wanted to throw a gavel.

We were third to present. I watched the first group glide through flawlessly. The second group flopped so hard people started whispering prayers.

Then it was us.

As we stood, I felt something strange—calm. Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe confidence. Either way, this was it.

Academic Hunger Games: Chanceland Edition.

And somehow... I was ready.

Chapter Seven: After the Verdict

The applause from the previous group was still echoing when we stepped forward, files clutched to our chests like shields of nervous pride. Herald muttered something that sounded like a prayer. Jane mouthed her last-minute case citations. Lola winked at me in silent encouragement. Andrew adjusted his tie even though no one else wore one. I, meanwhile, tried not to trip over the stage step and humiliate the entire Faculty of Law.

The hall was packed. Lecturers sat in front like a panel of Supreme Court judges. Rows of students filled every seat, buzzing with quiet excitement. Even the air felt like it was holding its breath.

At the back, I spotted Angel waving dramatically. Beside her sat Peter, arms folded, looking calm and protective like an older brother who had already claimed bragging rights on my behalf.

And then my eyes found him.

Aaron.

He sat two rows behind the panel, sleeves rolled just enough to provoke confusion, posture too casual to be casual. And there she was, next to him — that same girl from before. Composed. Polished. Too comfortable.

My heart stuttered. I tore my gaze away, forcing my focus straight ahead — only to meet Alex's eyes. He smiled, a small, steady nod that said: You've got this. Something inside me

steadied. I breathed.

The professor stepped forward, grinning like a man about to light fireworks. “Ladies and gentlemen, our next presentation: Group Three. Topic – Cyber Expression and Accountability: Should University Students Be Legally Liable for Content Shared on Anonymous Campus Confession Pages?”

Of course. The chaos-infested gossip pages that had ruined more reputations than academic failures ever could.

Jane began the opening statement, voice clear and firm.

“Freedom of expression is fundamental, yes. But where speech causes measurable harm, the law must intervene. Our presentation examines how defamation, data privacy, and emotional distress intersect with online anonymity.”

Her introduction set the tone. She cited the Defamation Act of 2008, outlined basic tort principles, and gracefully handed the floor to Andrew.

Andrew tackled the technical side, explaining digital footprints, metadata, and how cyber investigation units can trace anonymous accounts. He connected this to accountability and campus policy, earning impressed nods from one of the IT lecturers.

Lola followed with a fiery illustration. “Imagine a false rumor shared on an anonymous confession page about a lecturer or student. In minutes, it spreads across platforms. The victim’s reputation suffers. But when confronted, everyone hides behind ‘freedom of speech.’ Freedom is not chaos; it’s responsibility.” Her passion drew murmurs of approval from the crowd.

Herald, the group’s calm anchor, handled the counter-argument section. “We acknowledge that complete surveillance or identification of users may breach privacy rights,” he said, citing Article 21 of the Constitution. “However, proportional liability can exist where there is intent or reckless disregard for truth.”

Finally, it was my turn to conclude.

I stepped forward, palms slightly damp but voice steady. “Speech without consequence is an illusion. The law must evolve to reflect digital realities. We are not trying to silence expression, but to protect dignity. Because the moment we normalize anonymous harm, we legalize cruelty.”

The room went quiet for a breath. Then the professor smiled. “Excellent. Now for the cross-examination round. Group Three versus Group Four.”

We turned as Group Four approached – five sharply dressed students who looked like they spent the night rehearsing in front of mirrors. Their lead counsel, a short guy with rectangular

glasses and an overconfident smirk, adjusted his jacket. His partner, a poised girl with sleek braids, carried a folder thick enough to hide a small textbook.

The professor gestured. "Each pair will conduct one round of questioning and rebuttal. Counsel, proceed."

Herald gave me a quick nod. We stepped forward as co-counsels. The room felt smaller suddenly, lights hotter.

Short-Glasses started. "Counsel, is it not true that freedom of speech, under Article 21 (1) (a) of the Constitution, protects even anonymous expression, regardless of whether it offends another person?"

Herald's tone was calm. "Freedom of speech ends where defamation begins. The same Constitution safeguards the right to human dignity under Article 15."

He tried to interrupt, but I followed smoothly. "Anonymous platforms are not exempt from the tort of defamation. The use of a pseudonym does not erase liability. It only delays accountability."

The girl stepped in sharply. "But individuals voluntarily follow those pages. Isn't the audience equally complicit?"

I turned toward her, measured. "Consent to view content is not consent to be defamed. Victims don't volunteer for harm. The law distinguishes between participation and victimization."

Whispers rippled through the audience. The professor leaned forward, intrigued. Angel actually clapped once before covering her mouth. Peter nodded approvingly. Alex smiled faintly. Aaron leaned in, unreadable. The girl beside him whispered something that made his jaw tighten – and I felt it. That tiny sting mid-argument that had nothing to do with law.

But I didn't falter.

"For every right," I said, meeting the panel's gaze, "there is a corresponding duty. Anonymous cruelty cannot hide forever behind constitutional misinterpretation."

The professor laughed. "Now that," he said loudly, "is how a cross-examination should sound – precise, passionate, and terrifying for the opposing side."

The audience burst into applause. Even Group Four looked grudgingly impressed.

When it was over, we returned to our seats like survivors of an academic war. Angel rushed forward, pulling me into a hug. "You were insane," she said breathlessly.

"So I've been told," I replied, still dazed.

Alex found us next. "You handled that better than some final-year advocates," he said, pride

flickering behind his grin.

"Thanks for being here," I murmured.

He shrugged. "Wouldn't miss it."

Aaron didn't approach. Neither did the girl. But the silence he left behind was louder than any applause.

Peter patted my shoulder. "That was solid, Nella. Real courtroom potential."

We left the hall together, our laughter exhausted but light.

Exams hit right after, relentless and cruel. Days blurred into caffeine, late nights, and collective breakdowns. Jane threatened to burn her textbooks at least twice daily. Angel survived on sarcasm and pure willpower. Somehow, we all crawled to the finish line.

Nathan and Jane grew... complicated. Some nights she'd laugh at his messages, other days she'd frown and say, "He's acting weird." I stayed out of it. My emotional bandwidth was already at capacity.

When the last paper ended, Angel and I collapsed on the hostel floor. Five minutes later, my phone buzzed — a message from Emma.

"Hey! If you girls are free, come crash at mine for a few days. My parents are out, and I've got snacks, AC, and zero academic guilt."

We didn't need convincing. Jane and Lola had other plans, so it became our mini-retreat. Emma welcomed us with open arms, cold drinks, and enough comfort food to erase the semester from memory.

That night we marathoned true-crime documentaries until the popcorn turned suspicious. We talked — about school, love, betrayal, and the blurry line between healing and pretending.

I kept in touch with everyone. Lola's voice notes were chaos as usual. Jane's texts about Nathan were half drama, half confusion. Alex called twice a week; our conversations were calm, familiar, warm.

Aaron didn't call.

Until one evening, when his name lit up my screen.

I froze. Angel noticed instantly.

"Are you going to open it?"

I didn't reply. My heart thudded loud enough to hear.

On the screen, his message read:

"We need to talk."

Chapter Eight: Truth and Turbulence

I stared at the message for a full minute like it might disappear if I blinked too hard.

"We need to talk."

Excuse me? Talk? Now? We were on vacation. Different cities. Different time zones of emotional chaos. How exactly did he plan to talk—telepathy? I typed back, "When?" before I could overthink it. He replied almost immediately. "When school reopens. In person. No texts."

Great. So now I had an emotional countdown on my calendar. The talk was coming, and my anxiety already had its suit pressed for the occasion.

The vacation crawled by. Alex called often—too often—and I found myself not minding at all. He was funny, gentle, and sometimes annoyingly perceptive. We talked about everything, from campus drama to my mother's obsession with herbal teas. Somewhere between the laughter and late-night calls, I saw a softer side of him, one that didn't always have to perform confidence. And I liked it. Maybe too much.

One afternoon, I called Lola to check in. She immediately launched into updates. Jane and Nathan had become inseparable—matching outfits, matching playlists, matching delusion, probably. Lola was thrilled for her, but my heart sank.

"Lola," I started carefully, "I need to tell you something about Nathan."

She went quiet. "What about him?"

So I told her everything. The whole backstory—Angel's matchmaking plan, Nathan's sleazy persistence, the fake boyfriend night that dragged Alex into the picture, and the part Angel later told me about Nathan knowing Clifford was cheating and saying nothing.

By the time I finished, Lola's voice was tight with disbelief. "You mean Jane is falling for that Nathan? And you've known all this time?"

I nodded even though she couldn't see me.

“Nella, how could you keep that to yourself? Jane deserves to know before she gets hurt.”

The guilt hit me like bad Wi-Fi during an online exam. I knew she was right, but I also knew how fragile Jane could be. Still, silence was starting to look like betrayal.

After our call, I sat there, thinking about all of it until my mother came knocking. She asked if I was okay. I smiled and said I was fine, but even I didn't believe it. My mood was off, my thoughts scrambled. I wasn't even myself anymore.

Fast forward—school reopened.

The first week of reopening felt strange. Campus was quieter than usual, at least for now. Lola and Jane hadn't reported yet, so it was just me, Angel, and Emma keeping each other company. The post-exam sleepover had turned us into a trio nobody saw coming.

Angel, of all people, had finally decided I was worth being seen in public with. And Emma—sweet, calm, occasionally sarcastic Emma—fit right in like she'd been part of the group all along.

We'd planned to meet on campus that morning for a “quick brunch.” Translation: a three-hour gossip marathon disguised as food. Angel and I set off together, arguing over who looked more tired while she retouched her lip gloss using her phone camera.

“Girl, I'm serious,” she said, tapping her screen. “If anyone looks at me today and doesn't see excellence, it's because their vision is faulty.”

“Or because you've blinded them with that lip gloss,” I teased.

We found Emma already waiting near the café, sipping pineapple juice like she owned the place. “Finally!” she said, standing to hug us both. “I was starting to think you two got lost in your own reflection.”

Angel gasped. “The disrespect. You hang out with one law student for a semester and suddenly you're bold.”

Emma leaned forward, eyes bright. “Please, boldness is free. Speaking of bold, have you heard the new campus gist? Apparently, there's this—”

Angel suddenly snapped her fingers. “Wait! That reminds me, Nella, have you heard of this girl called Mira?”

Emma blinked, thrown off track. “Huh? No, who's Mira?”

I tilted my head. “Yeah... who's Mira?”

Angel leaned in, voice dropping like she was about to share top-secret intel. “She's in your Law class. A fair girl with too much lip gloss and even more confidence. Word is, she's been running

her mouth about you, saying you're 'full of yourself' and act like you run the class."

Emma's jaw dropped. "Wow? Overconfidence accusations in level one? These people need hobbies."

I laughed, but deep down, I was stunned. "Wait... me? Full of myself? For what, existing too loudly?"

Angel shrugged, sipping her drink. "Don't give her the attention. I just thought you should know."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Forget her, Nella. Some people talk because silence exposes their irrelevance."

I grinned. "Remind me to quote that when I finally meet her."

Angel and Emma kept gossiping about everything from campus crushes to cafeteria mysteries until our drinks ran out and the waiter started giving us the please go home look. By the time we finally left, my cheeks hurt from laughing, but a tiny thought still poked at me, that whole Mira comment. I told myself it didn't matter. It wasn't worth overthinking.

The week rolled by faster than my sleep schedule could recover, and before I knew it, Lola and Jane had finally reported. It was almost as if they planned it. I promised myself I'd talk to Jane as soon as I saw her. But fate clearly runs on petty energy because she saw me first and immediately started avoiding me.

Lola, the peacemaker, decided to stage a "friendly lunch" at The Nest. The plan was simple: bring the girls together and fix the tension. Simple plans never survive contact with reality.

Jane told us to go ahead while she "ran an errand." Translation: she didn't want to see me. When she finally arrived, Lola and I stood to greet her. She hugged Lola warmly, then looked at me like I was air-conditioning-visible but irrelevant.

I tried. "Hey, Jane. You look good."

She smiled tightly at Lola and ignored me completely. Lola's eyes darted between us, her patience slipping. "Okay, what's going on here? Can you two please talk?"

Jane turned to her, still not looking at me, and said through a sweet but sharp tone, "Talk to who? That hypocrite?"

It hit like a slap. Lola gasped softly. My throat felt dry.

"Jane, please," I tried again. "It's not what you think—"

She stood, grabbed her bag, and said, "Save the drama for your next presentation." Then she walked out.

Lola sighed, rubbing her temples. "Fix this, Nella. Before it fixes you."

As if the day hadn't already decided to ruin me, she then called Aaron. Apparently, she'd planned this too. "You're already here," she said. "Might as well deal with everything in one sitting."

So, there I was—sitting at The Nest, emotionally bruised, sipping juice that tasted like regret, waiting for the boy I'd been avoiding and overthinking for weeks.

Aaron arrived, calm as ever. He looked like peace I didn't trust. I straightened up, ready to get it all over with.

Before we could even start, fate added extra chaos.

Alex walked in.

Of course.

He spotted us immediately and walked over, face unreadable. "Wow, Nella," he said softly. "I've been trying to reach you all week. Called yesterday. No reply. But here you are."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"I'm sorry for being too much in your life," he added. Then he left.

Just like that.

My heart dropped. He'd been nothing but kind, and I'd hurt him without meaning to. The guilt stung. I turned back to Aaron, trying to steady my voice. "Aaron, I need to say this before my brain stops me again. I like you. A lot. But I can't keep doing this weird dance of silence and confusion. If this is one-sided, fine. I just needed to say it."

Aaron stared, stunned. His fingers tightened around his cup. Then, after what felt like forever, he spoke. "Nella, I didn't know. But... I'm seeing someone."

I blinked. "You're what?"

"Her name's Gabriela. We started talking during the break."

Gabriela. The name sounded like it came with lip gloss and heartbreak.

I forced a laugh that sounded nothing like laughter. "Oh. Right. Of course. Makes sense. The universe loves irony."

He looked almost guilty. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

I waved it off. "Don't worry. I'll survive. I'm practically a professional at this point."

The silence between us stretched, soft but painful. Then I smiled, that kind of half smile people give when they're trying not to fall apart. "Thanks for being honest, Aaron. Really."

I stood, grabbed my bag, and said, "Take care of Gabriela. And yourself."

Outside, the air felt heavier than the day itself. I sat on the steps, looking at the sky that refused to brighten. The wind was cold, my eyes colder. But somewhere between the heartbreak and the mess, I found myself chuckling.

Because honestly? Only I could manage to turn a casual hangout into a full-blown romantic demolition.

I took a deep breath, muttered to myself, "Well done, Nella Hayde. You've officially earned a PhD in emotional turbulence," and walked away.

Chapter Nine: Smokes and Mirrors

School had reopened, but peace clearly hadn't.

Classes resumed, but the emotional debris from last semester still lingered like unpaid rent. Alex had mastered the art of avoiding me. Jane, apparently his classmate in ghosting, also refused to acknowledge my existence. And Aaron? He'd been calling and texting like a man trying to win a customer back, but I wasn't ready for another round of the Aaron Show.

Lola, being the neutral land of our trio, decided to "stay out of any crossfire." Translation: she wanted peace but without the drama of earning it. So here we were, a friendship triangle split right down the middle. Jane had found new friends, Lola played safe, and I... was tired.

I spent most of my free hours with Emma and Angel. Emma had become my escape – calm, kind, the type who somehow makes tea feel like therapy. Angel was her usual blend of sass and loyalty, the one person who refused to let me wallow for too long.

But even she noticed how heavy I'd become.

"Girl, you need a plot twist," Angel said one evening as we lounged near the campus canteen.

"I think I've had enough twists to last a lifetime," I muttered.

She smirked. "Then maybe you need a new cast."

And that's when her plan hatched – Operation Fix Nella and Jane.

She looped Emma into it, convincing her to "befriend Jane casually" and lure her into a chill hangout, where I could conveniently appear and talk things out.

Simple plan. Clean plan.

Until it exploded like every other good intention in my life.

Saturday came, and Emma texted me: "We're here. The Nest. Come now."

When I arrived, Jane was already there, mid-sip of her drink, looking effortlessly unbothered.

Emma smiled nervously. "Jane, I—"

But Jane cut her off, eyes sharp on me. "Wow. The lengths you'll go to use people."

My heart dropped.

Then she turned to Emma. "And you. I thought we were becoming friends. Guess I was just your assignment."

Emma looked stunned. "Jane, I didn't—"

"Save it. Both of you, stay away from me."

And just like that, she stormed out, leaving me and Emma sitting there like bad actors in a tragic sitcom.

Emma sighed, eyes heavy with disappointment. "Nella, what exactly is going on with you? Everywhere you go, there's chaos."

"That's not—"

"I don't know who's wrong or right, but maybe you should figure yourself out first. Because everyone can't be the problem."

Then she left too.

The silence that followed was deafening. I sat there for a while, numb, before I spotted Nathan walking past. And suddenly, it clicked — Jane's anger, her sudden distance — it reeked of his nonsense.

I stormed up to him. "We need to talk."

He smiled that smug smile that made me want to file a complaint with the Ministry of Arrogance.

"I told her the truth," he said.

"What truth?"

"That you like me. That you've been pursuing me."

I froze. "What?"

He shrugged, still wearing that insufferable grin. "People deserve honesty."

Honesty? My hand twitched. For a split second, I considered delivering a lesson in gravity. But before I could, Emma appeared again, dragging me away before I became breaking news: 'Law Student Arrested for Introducing Man to Consequences'.

Once we were outside, Emma turned on me again – softer this time, but still tired.

"Nella, you need to sort yourself out. This isn't normal. It's like everywhere you go, drama follows. Maybe you should think about why."

And then she walked off, leaving me standing there – shattered, humiliated, and painfully self-aware.

I walked aimlessly across campus, tears finally breaking free. The night air felt thick, almost cruel. By the time I reached the open garden, I was too exhausted to hold anything in. I called my mum.

The second I heard her voice, I broke. I told her everything – the rumors, the distance, the heartbreak, the exhaustion.

She listened quietly, then said the one thing I didn't know I needed to hear.

"Nella, you've always been a fighter. You don't run from storms; you walk through them. But sometimes, walking through means thinking before reacting. Sit down, breathe, and figure it out. Then stand up again."

By the time I hung up, I felt a little lighter. Not fixed, but anchored.

Then came Peter – appearing like divine timing in human form.

He sat beside me. "Rough day?"

I laughed dryly. "You could say that."

I told him everything – Jane, Nathan, Aaron, Emma, Alex. He didn't interrupt, just listened like someone who genuinely wanted to understand.

When I finished, he said, "You can't fix everything at once. Start with the one person who deserves closure the most."

"Alex?"

He nodded.

So the next day, I did.

I went to his hall, asked for him, waited two hours by the entrance. When he finally showed up

and tried to turn back, I stopped him.

“Please, just give me five minutes.”

He sighed, folded his arms. “Five.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Alex. For everything. You didn’t deserve how I treated you. You’ve been nothing but kind and patient, and I repaid you with distance. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

My voice cracked halfway. I blinked back tears. “You’ve always been there for me, and I don’t even know if I deserve that anymore.”

He softened. “Hey, don’t say that.”

And then I broke down completely. He pulled me into a hug – the kind that feels safe enough to breathe again. I told him everything: the Jane mess, Aaron’s new girlfriend, Nathan’s lie, Emma’s words. He just held me through it, quietly.

For a moment, we just sat there, close enough for the silence to mean everything. Our eyes met, and the world stilled.

If not for the two girls passing by whispering “aww, cute”, I don’t know how that moment would’ve ended.

I stood abruptly, clearing my throat. “Right. Emotional breakdown over. Thanks for coming to my TED Talk.”

He laughed softly, standing too. “Anytime, drama queen.”

On my way back to the hall, I ran into Lola.

She took one look at me and sighed. “Girl, what happened now?”

So I told her. All of it. Jane. Aaron. Nathan. Emma. Everything.

She hugged me tight. “Okay, this is getting out of hand. Tomorrow, we fix this. Together.”

That promise was the first light I’d felt in weeks.

The next day, I dragged myself to class – Law of Torts, of all things. The lecturer, clearly on a mission to destroy our peace, decided to pick groups herself.

“If I let you choose your own partners, you’ll pick your friends. Comfort zones are the enemy of growth,” she declared.

The class erupted into chaos as people tried to locate their assigned partners. Somewhere in the noise, a voice yelled my index number.

I followed it, only to find a girl glaring at me like I'd stolen her lunch.

"You're my partner?" she asked, horrified.

"I guess so," I said slowly.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course you are. You're everywhere — especially around people's boyfriends."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, please. Don't act innocent. Everyone knows how you are."

I tried to walk away, but she stepped in front of me. "You think the world revolves around you? It doesn't. And maybe you should stay away from Gabriela's boyfriend."

The name hit me like ice water. Gabriela. Aaron's girlfriend.

I blinked. "You mean Aaron? He's my friend. That's all."

She scoffed. "Sure. Keep telling yourself that."

And just like that, she turned to walk away — right as someone called out her name.

"Mira!"

I froze.

Mira.

Of course. The same Mira Angel had warned me about.

I took a slow breath, forced a smile that could cut glass, and muttered under my breath,

"Perfect. Because clearly, I needed one more villain in this season."

Chapter Ten: Silence Has a Sound

The Law of Torts lecture ended in chaos. Everyone was groaning about the new research assignment while half the class scrambled to figure out who they'd been paired with. Mine

turned out to be Mira — the same girl who'd nearly bitten my head off earlier. Perfect. A long-term group assignment with someone who already hated me. Life really said, "Level unlocked: emotional damage."

But there was no time to dwell.

Lola had promised we'd finally talk after class — meaning Jane and I were getting dragged to The Nest whether we liked it or not.

When we arrived, Lola already had that "no one's leaving until we fix this" look on her face. I sat, Jane sat, and Lola folded her arms like a judge about to deliver a verdict.

"Nella," she said quietly, "just listen this time, okay?"

I nodded, heart thudding. Jane kept her eyes on the table, spinning her straw like it owed her money.

I swallowed. "Jane, I just need to know what I did wrong."

She laughed — sharp, tired. "You really don't know? Nella, Nathan told me everything. He said you were using me to get close to him. That all this... friendship was fake."

My stomach dropped.

"What? That's not true—"

She looked up for the first time, eyes red. "Do you even remember the first week of school? Before any of this? I met Nathan that week, when freshers first reported. We became friends quickly, so when he told me you were pretending not to know him during that study prep thing, I believed him. He said you were only acting like that because you were jealous — that you wanted him and were just using me to get close. And when you brushed him off that day, it made sense. He told me he was there because of me, and you snubbed him. Do you know how humiliating that felt?"

Her words hit like a slap.

Everything clicked at once, the silence, the distance, the hostility, all born from one boy's carefully planted lie.

I took a slow breath. "Jane, Nathan lied. Angel and Clifford tried to set me up with him weeks after you'd already met him. I turned it down. He wasn't there for me, or for you. He was just there to stir trouble because he can't breathe without drama."

Jane frowned, her defenses flickering. "You're saying none of that was true?"

"Not even close. You were my friend, Jane. I'd never use you for anything, especially not for some boy who can't even spell loyalty."

Lola reached for her drink but didn't sip, eyes darting between us like she was watching two bombs try to defuse each other.

Jane finally sighed, rubbing her temples. "I don't know what to believe anymore."

"That's fair," I said quietly. "But please, at least believe me when I say — I've never lied to you."

We sat in that thick, heavy silence where forgiveness doesn't come yet, but the door isn't closed either.

It wasn't perfect, but it was progress.

Later that day, I found Nathan lounging near the Art faculty steps, pretending to read. The sight of him made my jaw tighten.

"Enjoying your fiction?" I asked.

He looked up, smirking. "Nella. Always dramatic."

I stepped closer. "Why did you lie to Jane? What do you even get from all this?"

He shrugged. "Because you made me look like a fool. You act like you're better than everyone. Thought maybe you needed a little reality check."

A laugh slipped from me. "You know, for someone so obsessed with attention, you sure have a lot of time for nonsense."

"Maybe I just wanted to see what you'd do when people stopped liking you," he said, eyes gleaming. "Turns out, not much."

I nodded slowly. "You're right. I didn't do much. I let people walk away. But the difference between us, Nathan? I'll walk away and still have peace but for you, you'll still need an audience."

I turned and left him there, his arrogance echoing behind me.

If silence was a weapon, I had just learned how to use it without bleeding.

By the time I walked out of that confrontation with Nathan, my head was loud but my heart was finally quiet. I didn't scream, I didn't cry, I just walked. Past the hall, past the noise, until I found myself in the reading garden behind the library. The air smelled like rain and freshly cut grass, and for once, my thoughts didn't hurt to sit with. Maybe that's what healing starts like, not fireworks or closure, just quiet after chaos. So I sat there, tracing circles on the bench with my finger, breathing for what felt like the first time in weeks.

That was when I heard footsteps. "Footsteps approached, soft but certain. I'd forgotten this

was where Alex liked to come when he needed quiet too. Maybe that's why it didn't surprise me when I heard footsteps behind me. I didn't have to look up to know who it was..."

"You've been MIA," Alex said, taking a seat beside me.

I smiled faintly. "Been busy fixing the chaos I created."

He tilted his head. "Did it work?"

"Mostly. I think I earned a participation medal."

We both chuckled, then fell into silence, that peaceful kind that doesn't demand to be filled.

He turned toward me. "About that day... at the hall. When you came to see me. I should've said more."

I blinked. "More?"

"Yeah. You were hurting, and all I cared about was being there for you but the day I saw you with Aaron, I was filled with jealousy."

I looked down at my hands, heart tight. "I shouldn't have ghosted you. I was just embarrassed. It was beginning to look like having drama in my life was a daily habit."

"I didn't mind that," he said softly. "I just wanted to be there for you."

When I finally looked up, he smiled, gentle, honest. "Nella, I meant what I said before. I like you. That hasn't changed."

I laughed nervously. "Brings back the Island Hotel, rooftop, memories"

He grinned. "Yeah. I just figured it wouldn't hurt to remind you."

Something in me loosened. "Then maybe it's time I admit something too. I like you, Alex. I do."

"He reached for my hand, and the world quieted again. His thumb brushed my knuckles. What do you want?"

For once, I didn't run from the question. I didn't overthink it either.

"I want to stop pretending I don't feel something when I look at you," I admitted. "Maybe that's the only simple thing in my life right now."

He smiled. That soft, steady smile that felt like home. "Then maybe we start there. Simple." So we did. Quietly.

No declarations, no hashtags, no grand gestures, we just shared laughter, long walks, and peace. For the first time in months, I didn't have any fears.

Maybe for once, the universe was letting me breathe.

By the end of the week, the assignment with Mira had barely started, and every time I saw her, she rolled her eyes like she was allergic to my existence. Lola said Jane was still cooling off. Angel was plotting something. Emma hadn't texted.

Everything was calm, suspiciously calm.

And if I've learned anything at Chanceland University, it's that calm is just chaos stretching before its next explosion.

CHAPTER 11 – “The Reckoning”

Campus felt quieter than usual, too quiet. The kind of calm that made your skin tingle, like the universe was holding its breath before dropping another plot twist. I'd learned to tell the difference.

“Funny how calm looks so much like silence before an explosion,” I murmured as Angel looped her arm through mine.

“Come on, drama magnet,” she said. “You promised to at least pretend you're social. The Green Lounge awaits.”

The Green Lounge sat between the Arts and Business blocks, all beanbags, bright umbrellas, and loud laughter. It was the one place where law students and theatre kids shared gossip over overpriced iced coffee.

Angel and I ordered milkshakes and found a table near the railings, but my smile faltered when I saw them.

At the far end, Mira sat with her usual smirk, surrounded by noise. Next to her was a girl I didn't recognize, poised, effortlessly beautiful, and seated so close to Aaron it stung to watch. Her manicured hand rested on his arm like it belonged there.

Mira caught my eye instantly. “Oh look who it is, Chanceland's favorite home-wrecker,” she called, loud enough for half the café to turn. “Come say hi, Nella!”

Angel froze mid-sip and muttered beside me, “Don't you dare walk over there.”

But I did.

Because avoiding storms doesn't make them disappear.

The table went quiet as I approached. Mira's grin stretched wider. "Since you're here, meet my friend Gabriela. And her boyfriend—"

She paused dramatically, "—Aaron. You two know each other, right?"

Aaron shifted uncomfortably. His eyes darted anywhere but mine.

Gabriela tilted her head, curiosity glittering. "So, is it true? You and Aaron had a thing?"

The air thickened. Everyone waited. Aaron's jaw tightened, eyes flickering with something between shock and regret.

"Gabriela, that's not—" he began.

"It's fine," I cut in gently. "I can speak for myself."

I smiled faintly. "We had a misunderstanding. Feelings got lost in translation. But no, Gabriela, we never dated. I liked him, once. Past tense. But not enough to fight for what wasn't mine. I've outgrown confused feelings dressed as love."

Aaron looked up, guilt flickering in his eyes. Gabriela studied me for a bit, then gave a small, respectful nod. "Fair enough."

Mira, of course, couldn't let it rest. "Wow, that's convenient," she said. "You cause drama, then pretend you've evolved. Quiet poetic and pitiful."

I turned to her, calm. "Some of us talk to feel powerful, not to beg for attention, Mira. I'd rather be powerful."

The table went silent. Even Angel muttered, "And that's on period."

We left. I didn't look back.

Later that week, Mira messaged about our group project.

We should get this over with. Library, 2pm.

Fine. For the sake of my grade I went to meet her at the said time.

The tension between us could have powered the campus generator. We worked quietly. She edited my draft like it had personally offended her.

"You used the wrong precedent," she muttered.

"Thanks for catching that," I replied sweetly. "I wouldn't want to lower your GPA." She glared back at me.

If tension was a grading criterion, we'd both get As.

We finished the report without a word of genuine conversation.

A few days later, Lola texted,

Lola: It's time. Let's meet at The Nest after lectures.

After classes, we met at The Nest, the same spot where everything had once fallen apart. Jane looked nervous, guilt practically written across her face.

"I was stupid," she began, voice trembling. "I believed him. I thought I was protecting myself from betrayal, but all I did was betray you."

I exhaled, keeping my tone gentle. "I should've told you sooner that I knew Nathan. That silence cost us more than any lie ever could."

She smiled weakly. "We both messed up."

"Yeah," I said softly. "But at least we both learned."

Lola lifted her glass. "To learning."

We clinked. For the first time in months, it didn't feel forced. It felt real.

After a long, emotional day and a little laughter with the girls, I headed back to the hall ready to crash. But Angel had other plans.

She was perched on her bed, grinning like she'd just uncovered state secrets.

Angel: "Emergency gossip. Guess who Mira's latest obsession is?"

Me: "Please don't say who I think you're about to say."

Angel: "Nathan. I saw them sharing fries at Green Lounge Café. The guy is basically everywhere."

I nearly choked on my water.

Me: "You're kidding."

Angel: "Girl, I wish I was. That boy's breaking hearts like he's collecting trophies."

I groaned. "So he hasn't changed. Just found a new victim."

Angel's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Then maybe it's time someone changed the game. Time for payback."

Me: "What kind of payback?"

Angel: "The poetic kind... with a little bit of drama. O.O.P.S."

I blinked. "Oops?"

She grinned. "Operation Obliterate Playboy Scheme."

I snorted. "That's ridiculous."

"Ridiculously perfect," she said.

The upcoming Art & Media Department Showcase was the perfect event to use for our payback. The event was two days away and we spent as much time needed plotting and planning, looking for proof of his games with girls. Finally the day came, there was our stage, a campus-wide evening of performances and digital art displays. Angel submitted an anonymous "interactive piece" titled Modern Love Languages.

Halfway through the event, the main screen lit up with a projection of text messages, flirty, manipulative and familiar.

Nathan's messages.

His love-bombing to multiple girls.

Names cropped. Numbers blurred. But his face was watermarked on the screenshots, clear enough for those who know him to recognize. But anyone who'd crossed his path could connect the dots.

The crowd began whispering. Then gasping.

Mira's face drained of color. Nathan's trademark smirk evaporated. He left, humiliated. Mira stood still, processing, mask cracking but pride intact.

Angel leaned over and whispered, "Oops."

I couldn't help but laugh a quiet and satisfied laughter.

Revenge didn't need noise.

Sometimes, silence and a little bit of laughter did the talking.

A week later, I bumped into Emma near the library steps. She was walking out just as I was walking in.

The silence was awkward, thick, but not bitter. She sighed. "I didn't know what to do back then. You felt like a storm I couldn't stand in."

I smiled faintly. "Maybe I was. But storms clear skies too."

Her lips curved into a small smile. "You've changed."

"So have you."

She smiled. "Guess we're both learning the weather."

We laughed quietly, but it was a start.

After she left, I finally went inside the library. I stayed for a couple of hours. Just studying and existing in the silence, feeling the kind of peace that doesn't demand to be noticed.

When I stepped back out, the evening had turned gold. The sky glowed like it had forgiven the day for everything.

"Still turning storms into sunsets, huh?"

I turned. Alex was leaning against the rail outside the library, hands tucked into his pockets, that same easy smile that made calm feel contagious.

"Do you just appear out of nowhere now?" I asked.

"Only when it's worth it."

We fell into step, walking without rush. The air smelled like rain that had changed its mind.

He glanced sideways at me. "You look lighter."

"I feel lighter," I said. "I think I finally stopped fighting everything that isn't meant for me."

"About time," he teased. "The universe's been waiting for you to chill."

I laughed, soft but real. For a while, we didn't talk. Our hands brushed once, twice, until he quietly took mine, not like a claim, just a promise.

"Whatever this is," I said, "I don't want it to fix me. I just want it to remind me I'm okay."

He nodded. "Good. Because you are."

We walked on until the campus lights flickered on, warm, steady, golden.

Maybe I hadn't won every battle, but somewhere between heartbreak and healing, I'd found something better.

Me. I wasn't done becoming.

But for the first time in a long time... I liked who I was becoming.

CHAPTER 12 – BECOMING

The return to campus felt different this time.

Not loud.

Not chaotic.

Just... steady. Like the ground itself knew we weren't the same people who left months ago.

Cars rolled in. Suitcases dragged. Students hugged loudly across the courtyard. The air hummed with that familiar start-of-semester electricity, new timetables, new rooms, new gossip waiting to be born.

Angel and I had reported early, hauling our bags into our old room with the practiced annoyance of two people who had done this twice already.

Angel collapsed dramatically on her bed.

"I swear, if one more vacation ends before I'm mentally ready, I'm suing the Ministry of Time."

I laughed, placing my folded clothes into the wardrobe. "Girl, you said that last semester."

"And I'll say it again! This time with chest!"

Her voice echoed, and it felt... good. Normal.

A soft knock interrupted us.

Lola poked her head in.

Fresh braids. Bright smile. A hug that felt overdue.

"Oh my God! You two look alive!" she squealed.

We pulled her inside, laughing, and before long the room had that full, warm energy again, the kind you don't notice you've missed until it's back.

Ten minutes later, another knock.

Emma and Jane appeared at the door, shy smiles but unmistakable warmth.

It wasn't awkward.

It wasn't forced.

It was like someone opened a window in a stuffy room.

And suddenly we were all there again, me, Angel, Lola, Jane and Emma, five pieces that finally found the rest of themselves.

"Group hangout?" Lola proposed immediately.

"Non-negotiable," Jane agreed.

"Today," Angel insisted, already grabbing her bag.

We didn't plan a meeting spot. We just ended up walking together—down the stairs, across the courtyard, to Lola's room which was much bigger than ours.

It happened naturally. Which made it perfect. Lola's room became our gathering place, as it had somehow become last semester. We spread out, Angel on the floor with yogurt, Emma by the window sketching absentmindedly, Jane leaning against the wardrobe, Lola perched cross-legged on her bed, and me on a chair that kept threatening to wobble.

"So," Jane began, eyes shining with mischief, "who met who during vacation?"

Angel choked on her yogurt.

"I did not meet anyone physically. Emotionally? Yes. Spiritually? Absolutely not."

"Lies!" Lola pointed at her. "Did we not see that tall boy on your video call?"

"That was my cousin!"

We burst into laughter.

Emma looked up from her sketchbook. "Lola met someone though."

Lola gasped. "Emma! Avoid me!"

"Who?" Angel demanded.

"No one significant," Lola huffed. "We just... talked. And he kind of... likes my voice."

"Ohhh," Jane teased. "Radio presenter girlfriend loading."

Emma shook her head, laughing softly.

Then they all turned to me.

"Your turn, Nella," Angel said. "Any romantic entanglements? Emotional situationships? Secret weddings?"

I lifted my hands. "My vacation was peaceful. Very peaceful."

They all exchanged the same face.

A very dramatic hmm.

Lola smirked. "And Alex? No calls? No texts? No butterflies with legs?"

I ignored her. They screamed.

The teasing only got louder.

We talked about everything. From who traveled, who didn't, who gained weight, who lost weight, who swore to study harder, who swore to date softer.

Then naturally, the topic shifted.

"The awards ceremony," Angel said. "I heard the list drops on Friday and the ceremony itself is two weeks away"

Jane gasped.

"I swear if Lola doesn't get Best Moot Court Debater, I'm fighting the Dean."

Emma blushed. "I just submitted for Artistic Achievement. Not sure I'll get it."

"You will," I told her.

"And you," Lola said, pointing at me, "you're getting something. Look at your GPA."

"I'm not expecting anything."

"You never do," Angel said. "But life still be giving you main character moments."

I threw a pillow at her.

In between the teasing, the confessions, and the laughter, something settled quietly among us:

We had survived Level 100.

We weren't the same people.

And thank God for that.

The next afternoon, Angel and I went out for lunch at a small spot just outside campus. On our way back, I saw him.

Aaron.

Standing near the little garden beside the lecture theatre, hands in his pockets, waiting.

Angel looked at me.

"You going?"

"I think... yes," I whispered.

I walked toward him slowly, the breeze tugging at my hair, the world unusually still.

Aaron looked up the moment he sensed me, his shoulders lowering as if he'd been holding his breath for days.

"Nella," he said softly.

"Aaron."

We stood there in a pocket of quiet. Not awkward, not heavy... just honest.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I've been rehearsing this conversation in my head all vacation. And none of the versions felt right. Maybe because none of them were simple."

I waited.

"I cared about you," he admitted, voice low. "Not the confused kind of caring. The real kind. But everything around us was... noisy. Timing was bad. Feelings were unclear. And I didn't understand how to handle any of it."

I met his eyes, steady. "And Gabriela?"

He nodded, slowly. "With her... things made sense. She was straightforward. She didn't confuse me. I knew what she felt, and she knew what I felt. It was easy."

"And I wasn't easy," I said, not bitter.

He shook his head immediately. "No. You weren't easy because you weren't supposed to be simple. You made me think. You made me feel... big things. Things I wasn't ready for. I didn't know what to do with that. So I ran."

The honesty stung, but in a clean kind of way.

He continued, "And the thing with Alex... even when nothing was happening, I could see something. The way you relaxed around him. The way he watched you, like he'd memorized your existence. I didn't know how to compete with that. So I stepped back."

"There wasn't anything between us then," I said quietly.

"I know," he whispered. "But sometimes it's not about what's happening. It's about what could happen."

He took a small breath.

"Gabriela and I ended things. Not because of you, don't think that because I wasn't present. I was half-in, half-out, and she deserved someone whole."

I nodded. "I hope you give yourself the chance to figure out what you actually want someday."

He looked up at me and something in his expression softened.

"I wanted to tell you this," he said. "You were never a second option. I just wasn't brave enough for a first one."

That line sat between us, tender and painful, but somehow freeing.

I stepped closer, just a little. "Aaron... we were young and confused. We made mistakes. We learned. That's enough."

His exhale sounded like release.

"So we're okay?" he asked.

"We're okay," I said, and meant it.

He smiled. A real, unguarded one. "You deserve someone who doesn't hesitate" he said.

Before I could respond, he added quietly:

"And someone who chooses you... even when things get loud."

He gave me a small nod, almost a farewell, and walked away.

He didn't look back.

And surprisingly... neither did I.

For the first time, the chapter between us closed without regret just clean understanding.

By Saturday afternoon, Chanceland was alive again, music from dorms, shouting from the football pitch, the sun warm and full.

Alex texted:

Alex:

"Steal you for a few hours? I promise not to kidnap you."

I agreed and waited for him at the courtyard in front of my hall.

Alex caught up easily, hands in his pockets, that familiar half-smile tugging at his mouth.

I laughed. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He offered his hand.

And I took it.

He led me to the quiet stretch behind the Arts Park, a place barely anyone visited on weekends. Under the shade of a giant flamboyant tree, a blanket was spread out. A real picnic blanket. With an actual basket.

I stared.

"Alex. Did you... plan this?"

He shrugged, suddenly shy.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Depends on how impressed you are."

"I'm... extremely impressed," I said.

"Then yes," he said, relieved. "I planned it."

He set out cold juice, chicken wraps, fruit slices, and a small chocolate bar with 'Try me on sad days' written on the wrapper in marker.

I picked it up, smiling.

"You wrote this?"

"Yeah. You looked stressed last semester."

"You noticed?"

"I always notice."

"You look like someone who actually rested over the break," he said as I sat.

"I'm trying this new thing, healing," I teased.

He grinned. "Looks good on you."

We talked for hours about exams, fears, the chaos of last semester. He poked fun at my study habits; I called him dramatic. He flicked crumbs at me; I threw one right back. Halfway through, he plucked a mango slice, held it out to me.

"Try this."

"I can hold it," I said.

"I didn't offer your hands, Nella."

I rolled my eyes, but leaned in anyway. His eyes didn't leave mine. The mango was sweet.

He said, "Now you owe me one."

"For what?"

"For making me think you didn't like mangoes."

"I never said I didn't."

"You gave 'anti-mango body language,'" he teased.

"Oh, please."

We laughed, the kind of laugh that didn't break the moment but only deepened it.

A light breeze swept through, blowing a loose strand of hair across my face. Before I could tuck it behind my ear, Alex reached out gently.

"Hold still," he murmured.

His fingers brushed my cheek... slowly... carefully... deliberately.

He tucked the strand away, and his hand lingered longer than necessary.

Too close.

Too soft.

Too much silence for two people pretending not to fall.

"Nella," he said.

I swallowed. "Hm?"

"Last semester... you scared me."

"What? Why?"

"Because you were figuring yourself out. And I didn't want to get in the way of that."

My chest tightened.

"I didn't want to confuse things."

He smiled.

"You didn't."

He looked at me carefully.

"As long as you're not confused now."

I inhaled, ready to say something I wasn't even sure I'd fully formed but Alex beat me to it.

"Don't say it," he murmured, smirking. "If you say it here, in this moment, I might actually lose my mind."

My laugh came out softer than I meant.

He rose first, offering me his hand in that casual-but-not-casual way of his.

"Let me walk you back," he said. "I slid my hand into his."

It was warm, familiar and dangerous in the gentlest way.

We didn't kiss.

But it felt like the universe leaned in anyway. We walked back to the hall slowly, the kind of walk where neither of us wanted to reach the end too soon. When we finally did, Alex squeezed my hand before letting go.

"Goodnight, Nella," he murmured.

"Goodnight, Alex."

And then he walked away just far enough to leave my heart softly buzzing.

I showered, changed, and climbed into bed beside a sleeping Angel. My mind kept replaying the afternoon, the picnic, the laughter, the almost-confession, the warmth.

For the first time in a long time, I felt... ready.

For the semester.

For the ceremony.

For whatever came next.

Soon the day arrived and campus buzzed with excitement, it didn't feel abrupt. It felt like the day I'd been walking toward.

By late afternoon, the campus auditorium glowed in warm gold tones, decorated with banners from each faculty. It wasn't overly fancy, just elegant enough to make you sit straighter, breathe deeper, and feel the quiet weight of something important.

Students filled the hall. Lecturers lined the first two rows. Cameras flashed. Bags rustled. Excitement buzzed like static in the air.

Lola looked stunning in a navy dress.

Emma wore a soft lavender gown that made her look like she'd stepped out of a painting.

Jane wore a red dress.

Angel wore something a bit controversial.

"You look nervous," Angel whispered as we sat.

"I feel nervous," I admitted.

"You'll be fine," she said.

Then added, "If you faint, I'm recording it."

The ceremony began.

Awards were announced by departments.

Names were called.

Cheers erupted.

Students walked proudly across the stage.

Then—

"Rising Scholar Award — Nella Hayde."

My heart stopped.

The girls screamed so loudly the Vice Chancellor laughed into the microphone.

I walked up, legs shaking, smile trembling but real.

Next:

Best Moot Court Debater — Lola Thompson

Another scream from our row.

Artistic Innovation Award — Emma Abban

Gentle applause. Emma blushed all the way to the stage.

Then the big one i didn't see coming:

Most Outstanding Student of the Year – Alex Johnson.”

My heart jolted.

He walked up to the stage, tall and calm, but I knew him enough to recognize the shock beneath the smile.

Our eyes met briefly.

And something in my chest did the thing I’m not ready to name yet.

After the major awards, the Dean stepped forward.

“Now... as is tradition, we invite one awardee to give the Student Reflections Speech...”

The microphone was randomly handed to Emma.

She froze.

The hall went silent.

Emma’s eyes darted around. She panicked then she whispered, almost too softly:

“Um... I think... I think someone else should give this.”

She turned toward me.

“Nella should do it,” she said.

“Nella Hayde.”

Gasps. Murmurs.

My heart dropped.

Emma continued, voice steadier now:

“She’s the one who grew the most. She’s the one I learned from. She’s the one whose journey represents us best.”

A ripple of surprise moved through the hall. The hall applauded and the mic was placed in my hand.

My heart thudded but I walked up. Not because I was ready, but because something in me finally was.

I stood behind the podium. The lights felt like warmth instead of heat.

And I spoke.

"Good evening, everyone.

When I walked into Chanceland University for the first time, I thought becoming myself would be easy.

I thought growth was straightforward, you work hard, make friends, stay focused, and everything somehow falls into place.

But it didn't."

A hush spread across the hall.

"Level 100 taught me something uncomfortable...

Becoming yourself is not a calm process.

It is confusing, chaotic, sometimes humiliating.

You lose people you thought would stay.

You discover truths you weren't ready for.

You learn to forgive people who never apologized and you learn to forgive yourself for things you didn't know better about."

Someone exhaled sharply in the audience.

"But this year also taught me that progress is not perfection.

It's trying again.

It's choosing honesty over pride.

It's opening the door to friendships you almost ruined.

It's letting go of the things you held onto out of fear...

And walking toward the things that scare you because they matter."

My voice softened.

"We made mistakes.

We cried.

We learned, sometimes painfully.

But today...

We made it.

Not perfect but better.”

Silence.

Then a wave of applause erupted so loud it shook the hall.

I stepped back, breath trembling not with fear, but with relief.

For the first time, my voice felt like mine.

As I walked backstage after the applause faded, a student usher stopped me.

“Hi, someone asked me to give you this. Said you’d know what it means.”

She handed me a folded cream-colored card.

No name.

No sender.

Just ink that looked like it belonged to someone who wrote slowly... intentionally.

“Level 100 was only the introduction.

I can’t wait to see who you become next.”

I slipped it into my handbag before anyone noticed.

That evening, the five of us: Lola, Angel, Jane, Emma and I squeezed into a booth at The Green Lounge, fairy lights hanging above us.

No one knew about the mysterious note.

Tonight was for laughter.

The energy was sparkling.

Angel ordered milkshakes like it was a national duty.

Lola toasted to her award and then teased Emma for “blushing like she won Miss Chanceland.”

Emma laughed softer than the rest of us, but her eyes were bright, open in a way they hadn’t been before.

And me?

They teased me about the speech.

Lola: “You’d think she rehearsed in front of the mirror for three weeks.”

Emma: "No... that was from the heart. You sounded like someone who grew."

Angel: "Our girl really said 'becoming is messy' like she wasn't the CEO of drama."

Me: "I will pour this milkshake on you."

Jane: "Please do. For the culture."

We ate, gossiped, laughed, and made fun of ourselves.

I looked around at them, the girls I fought with, healed with, learned with
and for the first time, it felt safe.

"Level 200 will be different," Lola declared.

"Better," Angel added.

Emma smiled and said, "Real."

We clinked glasses, promising nothing and everything at once.

When we finally parted ways, Lola and Angel walked with me to the hall.

Jane and Emma branched off, waving dramatically.

But I wasn't sleepy.

Not yet.

There was someone waiting.

The message came as I approached my door:

Alex: "Can you meet me? Arts Block rooftop."

No explanation.

No emoji.

Just a simple text.

I told Lola and Angel not to wait up, and I walked alone through the quiet campus. The night
was soft, warm breeze, low hum of distant music, scattered stars.

At the top of the Arts Block, the rooftop was lit only by city glow.

And Alex stood there.

Hands in pockets.

Suit jacket off.

Tie loose.

He looked like someone who received life changing news and didn't know how to stand still with it.

I exhaled.

"I thought you'd gone to the hall."

"I... couldn't. Not yet."

He stepped closer, the wind brushing past us.

"I got an email this morning," he said quietly. "The international study program i applied for... I got in."

Time paused.

He swallowed. "It's a full scholarship. Four years abroad. They want me in August."

"Alex..." My voice cracked before I could control it.

He gave a small, nervous smile.

"I should be overjoyed. This is everything I ever wanted. But the first person I thought about telling wasn't my mum, or my siblings... it was you."

My heartbeat stuttered.

He looked at me like I was something he wasn't sure he deserved to hold.

"I didn't want to tell you earlier because I wanted today to be about you," he murmured. "Your award... your speech... your moment."

The air thickened.

The kind of silence that carried truth in it.

"How do you feel?" I whispered.

"Happy," he said.

Then after a beat "Scared."

"Why scared?"

"Because leaving now... when things are finally starting to make sense between us..."

His voice broke a little.

"...it feels like cruel timing."

I stepped closer, until the space between us was one breath wide.

"We don't lose each other because of distance," I said softly.

"Not after everything we survived this year."

He let out a shaky laugh.

"You always know exactly what to say."

"And you always know exactly what I'm afraid to admit."

He touched my hand, not accidentally but fully, intentionally.

Warm. Steady. Soft.

"Whatever this is," he whispered, "I don't want to rush it. I don't want to define it too early. I just... don't want to lose it."

"You won't."

We stood there, shoulder to shoulder, city lights flickering under us.

Not kissing, just choosing each other quietly.

His forehead rested against mine.

"Thank you," he murmured. "For making this year make sense."

I closed my eyes.

"Thank you for making it worth remembering."

Back in my room, after washing my face and changing into a big T-shirt, I checked my phone.

I NEW EMAIL

Subject: Your International Student Fellowship Application Has Been Received

My breath hitched.

I never applied.

The message:

"We look forward to reviewing your submission."

Somebody did this for me.

Or... instead of me.

But who?

And why?

As I plugged in my charger, another notification blinked.

A number I didn't recognize.

Labelled only:

OFFICE OF THE DEAN – PRIVATE

I opened it.

“Congratulations, Miss Hayde.

You have been shortlisted for a new campus initiative.

Confidential meeting: Monday, 9:00 AM.

Do not disclose this message.”

My heart slowed into an unfamiliar rhythm.

Something was happening around me.

Something big.

And mysterious.

And deliberate.

And I wasn't sure if I was being protected...

or being prepared.

I looked at the card tucked inside my bag.

“This is only the beginning.”

Maybe it was.